

University of San Diego

Digital USD

Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty
Scholarship

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

9-30-2006

Dying, Death, and Afterlife from a Buddhist Perspective

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty>



Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe PhD, "Dying, Death, and Afterlife from a Buddhist Perspective" (2006). *Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship*. 20.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/20>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

*Dying, Death, and Afterlife in Dharma
Traditions and Western Religions*

Edited by

Adarsh Deepak, Ph.D.

*Dharma Association of North America (DANAM)
Poquoson, Virginia*

and

Rita DasGupta Sherma, Ph.D.

Binghamton University, New York

Contemporary Issues in Constructive Dharma Vol. 4
Proceedings of a Session at the Third DANAM Conference
held at 2005 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 18–20 November 2005

2006



Deepak Heritage Books
Hampton, Virginia, USA
www.deepakheritage.com



DEEPAK HERITAGE BOOKS

Published by

A. Deepak Publishing

A division of Science and Technology Corporation

10 Basil Sawyer Drive

Hampton, Virginia 23666

www.deepakheritage.com

Copyright © 2006 by A. Deepak Publishing

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-937194-51-5

Cover design:

The theme elements of the cover design and the DANAM Logo [composed of stylized 'infinite wave', and the acronym DANAM (pronounced dā, as in cart + nam, as in number) in both English and Sanskrit (inside of the oval in devanagari script)] are taken, with permission of Dharma Association of North America, from the DANAM web site design at www.danam-web.org. The 'infinite wave' symbolically represents Dharma, a term (with no English equivalent) derived from the Sanskrit (Sk.) root, *dhri*, "to sustain", that implies innate or natural order, law and code sustaining the changing world (*jagat*, in Sk.) of both non-living and living matter, undergoing change in a periodic manner, without beginning and end. Dharma is often traditionally called *Sanātana Dharma*, the Sk. term 'sanātana' (eternal and imperishable) being a qualifier, rather than an adjective.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

DANAM Conference (3rd : 2005 : Philadelphia, Pa.)

Dying, death, and afterlife in Dharma traditions and Western religions / edited by Adarsh Deepak and Rita DasGupta Sherma.

p. cm. — (Indic heritage series) (Contemporary issues in constructive Dharma ; v. 4)

"Proceedings of a session at the third DANAM Conference held at 2005 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 18–20 November 2005."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-937194-51-5

1. Death—Religious aspects—Congresses. 2. Future life—Congresses. I. Deepak, Adarsh. II. Sherma, Rita DasGupta. III. Title.

BL504.D27 2005

202'.3—dc22

2006026887

Printed in the United States of America

He knows that Supreme Abode of Brahman, wherein founded, the world shines brightly. The wise men, who free from desires, worship the Person, pass beyond the seed of rebirth.

He who entertains desires, thinking of them, is born again...on account of his desires. But of him who has his desires fully satisfied, who is a perfected soul, all his desires vanish even here on earth.

Mundaka Upanishad

The Master said: "Come close. In the eighth month, I intend to leave this world.... If you knew where I was going, you would not be crying. The nature itself is without birth and without destruction, without going and without coming."

On the day the Master died a strange fragrance, which did not fade for several days, filled the temple.... He died on the third day of the eighth month, and in the eleventh month, his sacred coffin was received and interred on Mount Ts'ao-ch'i. From within his resting place a bright light appeared and rose straight toward the heavens, and two days passed before it finally dispersed.

The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

This we tell you as a word from the Lord; those of us who are still alive when the Lord comes will have no advantage over those who have died; when the command is given, when the archangel's voice is heard, when God's trumpet sounds, then the Lord himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead will rise, then we who are still alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

New Testament, 1 Thessalonians

CHAPTER 2

Dying, Death and Afterlife from a Buddhist Perspective

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

University of San Diego

Since earliest times, death has fascinated, terrified, and confounded human beings. Virtually every religious tradition offers some explanation of three key concerns: the beginnings of the world, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and the end of life. The Buddhist traditions have given special attention to the meaning of life and the end of life as central topics for reflection.¹

According to legend, the Buddha was born to royalty and was known as Siddhartha prior to his enlightenment. When the youthful Prince Siddhartha became curious and set out to discover what lay beyond the palace walls, he saw four sights he had never encountered before: a sick person, an old person, a corpse, and a mendicant. He asked his chariot driver, Chandraka/Channa, about each in turn and was surprised to learn that all human beings are subject to sickness, old age, and death. He was intrigued to learn that the mendicant was one who had renounced the pleasures of life to search for the meaning of human existence. These four encounters—with sickness, old age, death, and renunciation—had such a profound effect on the young prince that they irrevocably turned him toward the spiritual path.

The Buddha adopted a number of key features of the religious milieu into which he was born, such as *karma* (cause

and effect), rebirth, the boundless nature of time and space, meditation, the *śramaṇa* tradition with its renunciant ideal, and the goal of spiritual liberation, known to Hindus as *mokṣa* and to Buddhists as *nirvāṇa*. The Buddha rejected other key features, such as *ātman*, Brahman, caste, the authority of the Vedas, a creator god, elaborate rituals, extreme asceticism, the worship of deities, animal sacrifice, and the authority of *brahmin* priests. After years of religious learning and practice, Buddha Śākyamuni systematized existing beliefs, reinterpreted some of them, and, like a number of other teachers, developed new insights. To offset fatalistic or deterministic interpretations of karma, he emphasized the importance of actions as they are created at the present moment and the intentions that motivate actions. In place of extreme austerities, he advocated a middle way somewhere between asceticism and indulgence. Instead of understanding rebirth as the transmigration of a soul or enduring entity, he explained rebirth simply as re-existence (*punabbhāva*) based on nothing more than an apparent continuity of impermanent moments of consciousness. The Buddha also taught the new ideas he had discovered on his own: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the Three Trainings (*śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*), and the Three Marks of Existence (*dukkha*, the unsatisfactory nature of existence; *anitya*, the impermanent nature of all compounded phenomena; and *anātman*, soulessness or no-self). The three characteristics of existence provide a convenient entry point for understanding Buddhist views on dying, death, and the afterlife.

Navigating the Perils of Death

Perhaps because of the deep impression the “four sights” made on the young prince, after his enlightenment the Buddha did not shy away from the reality of death or try to hide it from his followers. Instead, the first of the Four Noble Truths he taught his followers was that living beings inevitably experience four miseries: birth, sickness, old age, and death. He taught them that the wise person faces these miseries honestly and directly, and strives to find a lasting solution to them. He recommended meditation on death, including contemplation in cemeteries and charnel grounds to help his followers realize the fleeting nature of human existence and all composite phenomena. Although cremations can be quite grisly and unnerving to the modern sensibility, because we normally avoid anything that reminds us of our own mortality, they are also the most direct way to confront the inevitability of death that awaits all living beings.

The Buddha’s teachings on impermanence are a way of waking human beings up to the reality of death and reminding them to live a meaningful life. The Buddha emphasized the fact that death comes to all living beings, but that is not the only problem. Appropriating the prevalent South Asian belief in rebirth, he taught that, unless living beings manage to liberate themselves from the repetitive cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*), they will unavoidably take another existence in one of five (later six) realms, or migrations (*jāti*). In the Buddhist schema, only sentient beings are subject to birth, death, and rebirth. That is, only beings with consciousness, who feel pain and suffering—not plants or inanimate objects—are caught up in the process of cyclic existence. Sentient beings take rebirth in accordance with the actions (*karma*) they have created in both this and previous lifetimes, which explains why bad things

sometimes happen to good people, and vice versa. Wholesome actions lead to rebirth in pleasant states of existence, whereas unwholesome actions lead to rebirth in unpleasant states, in proportion to both the quality and quantity of those actions.

In the Buddhist view, for example, good deeds tainted by pride can lead to rebirth as a god, laziness to rebirth as an animal, greed and stinginess to rebirth as a hungry ghost, and hatred and anger to rebirth as a hell being. The quality of one's motivation, the intensity of one's delusions, and the frequency of one's beneficence or misdeeds affect the intensity and duration of the pleasure or pain one will experience in the future. Since it is impossible to reenact deeds committed in the past, the Buddha stressed the importance of creating wholesome actions in the present, because they are the causes of future happiness or misery. Although he clearly stated that both fortune and misfortune are the results of one's own deeds, he did not present the law of cause as deterministic or *jāti* as an inescapable fate or destiny. Instead, he exhorted his followers to practice mindfulness of actions of body, speech, and mind, and to live their lives in such a way as to avoid taking rebirth in one of the unfortunate states of migration.

The purpose of contemplation on death is to gain realization of the inevitability of death and its imminent possibility. Death is certain to come to all living things, but the time of death is unpredictable. Yama, the Lord of Death, is portrayed as ready to pounce and drooling in anticipation of his next victim. The danger of ignoring the inevitability of death is that, without a sense of its imminence, one is liable to waste life in worldly pursuits and be completely unprepared to face the most important moment of our life. For this reason, the Buddha advised his followers to cultivate their minds, both through

intensive meditation and moment-to-moment mindfulness practice.

The practice of meditation and mindfulness helps one prepare psychologically for the experience of dying, whether it be the death of a friend, a family member, or oneself, and to meet death with courage, composure, and dignity. Those who spend their lives in worldly pursuits, without giving thought to any deeper meaning in life, are likely to die in a state of anxiety, agitation, and regret. By contrast, those who have familiarized themselves with virtue need not fear death. After living a meaningful life of cultivating wisdom, compassion, and single-pointed concentration, they are likely to die calmly, without regrets or self-recrimination. Through contemplation on death and impermanence, it is possible to view death not as a disaster, but as an opportunity. It is possible for a dying person who has cultivated mindfulness to gain direct insight into suffering and impermanence. The process of dying can also be an opportunity to practice momentary awareness, to practice the perfection of patience, to develop compassion for others who are sick or suffering, and even to achieve the ultimate goal, the achievement of liberation or enlightenment.

In the Lamrim texts of the Tibetan tradition,² the Buddha's teachings on death are systematized into a useful formula for contemplation: Death is definite, but the time of death is indefinite, and at the time of death, only Dharma practice will be of any value. When contemplating the first point, one reflects that every being who takes birth eventually dies. Taking examples from history and from one's own life experience, one comes to the direct realization that no living being escapes the inevitability of death. Contemplating the second point, one reflects that death is definite, but the time of

death is indefinite. Although death is inevitable for every living being, there is no way to predict precisely when it will occur. Although everyone hopes to live a full life and die a painless death in old age, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. It is not uncommon for people to die suddenly in the prime of life. Some die in their youth, when they are babies, or even while still in the womb. Each sentient being has an allotted life span, based on his or her actions in the past, but life experiences are the result of both causes and conditions. Consequently, a person's allotted life span can be cut short at any time by an accident, sudden illness, or other circumstance or contributing condition.

Contemplating the third point, one reflects that when death occurs, only our wholesome actions and Dharma practice will be of any value. Wholesome actions are valuable because, in view of the law of cause and effect, if one has engaged in unwholesome actions, such as killing, stealing, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and deceit, then one has a great deal to worry about, because those actions will produce their effects in the future, that is to say, future lives. On the other hand, if one has engaged in wholesome actions, one can die without regret, guilt, shame, or fear. In the end, the best preparation for death is to live a good life. Wholesome actions are both their own reward and the best guarantee of a favorable rebirth; those actions that create meaning and happiness during this lifetime will naturally result in pleasant rebirths in the future.

Dharma practice is valuable at the time of death for many reasons, perhaps the most significant being it helps one deal with attachment. From a Buddhist perspective, human unhappiness, disappointment, and grief are directly related to attachment. The greater one's attachment, the greater one's

suffering when the object of attachment is lost. The suffering that surrounds death is a poignant case in point. Loved ones experience grief and suffering when they lose the object of their affections, and the dying person also experiences grief and suffering at the time of separation. When the time of death comes, all one's friends and loved ones are stripped away and all one's possessions and achievements become utterly meaningless. Death is the terminus of this lifetime, signaling not only the end of our body, but also the end of our present identity, relationships, bright ideas, accomplishments, and aspirations in this lifetime. As the body declines, it can become a source of great frustration, roughly in proportion to one's attachment to robust health and physical beauty. As the body begins to disintegrate at the time of death, attachment can also become a major hindrance in the process of transition from this lifetime to the next.

As death approaches, it is said that only one's spiritual practice and mental cultivation have any practical value. For example, contemplations on the impermanent, unsatisfactory nature of the human body prepare the frail and elderly to deal with aging and illness realistically. Meditations on patience and compassion enable one to cope with the process of aging without anger and resentment. Reflections on the unsatisfactory nature of the human body help one to face physical degeneration and death with courage and detachment.

From a Buddhist point of view, a genuine and experienced Dharma practitioner will naturally be prepared to die well. There is no way to predict when death will occur, but contemplation on the imminent possibility of death can be very helpful when confronted with a terminal diagnosis or the experience of dying. Meditations that familiarize one with the

stages of the dying process can help one negotiate these stages calmly and mindfully. These meditations are designed to help practitioners die without fear and regret, and help them achieve an optimal rebirth, but they are also valuable tools for everyday living.

The Transition from Life to Life

The question of what happens after death naturally arises for every thoughtful human being. It is frequently declared that we cannot know what lies beyond death, because no one has ever returned to tell others. This adage does not apply in South Asia, however, where it is assumed that living beings routinely return and that spiritual adepts are very likely to tell others what lies beyond death. At the time of the Buddha, the belief in rebirth was widespread and the topic of rebirth is mentioned in many discourses. Time and again, *arhats* and other experienced meditators are portrayed as having easy access to knowledge of the past lives of themselves and others, knowledge that is used to confirm the Buddha's teachings. On the basis of meditative stabilization that is a union of calm abiding (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipāśyana*), experienced meditators may acquire five supernormal powers: divine eye, divine ear, memory of past lives, knowing the minds of others, and magical emanation. With the power to directly see the past lives of oneself and others, the existence of rebirth is no longer merely a matter of hearsay or speculation, but can be confirmed through one's own direct experience. One is also able to confirm that all sentient beings are subject to repeated rebirth, except for the *arhat*, who has eradicated all the *kleśas*, the mental afflictions, and has thereby achieved *nirvāṇa*, liberation from rebirth.

The question of what happens to an individual after death is a matter of ongoing dispute among Buddhists, yet all schools concur that the mental continuum of an ordinary being takes another birth. That is to say, apart from those who have achieved the state of an *arhat*, a liberated being, all sentient beings experience rebirth after death. The type of existence one takes after death, whether pleasant or unpleasant, depends on the actions one has created in previous lifetimes, wholesome or unwholesome. For example, in the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*), Buddhaghosa describes how, when the life-continuum ends, a virtuous person is surrounded by an accumulation of wholesome deeds, whereas a nonvirtuous person is surrounded by an accumulation of unwholesome deeds. This experience may be equivalent to the life review experienced by many people who have come close to death. After the "death consciousness" (the last moment of consciousness of this life) arises and ceases, the rebirth-linking consciousness arises, and one experiences the signs of a pleasant or unpleasant destiny, as a result of the wholesome or unwholesome karma one has previously created. For a virtuous person, the signs of a pleasant migration appear: pleasure groves, heavenly palaces, wish-fulfilling trees, and so on.³ For a nonvirtuous person, the signs of an unpleasant migration appear: the flames of hell, forests of knives, and so on.⁴ Some contemporary Buddhists, especially in the West, interpret these passages as describing happy or hellish states of mind rather than actual states of rebirth, but the pleasures and torments appear quite real in the texts.

The moments immediately following death may therefore either be joyful or terrifying, depending on one's actions in the past. Although it is too late to compensate for unwholesome deeds once the process of dying has begun, it is

during this process that the meditations on dying can be utilized to maximum advantage. For example, meditation on the dissolution of the aggregates and the elements of the body can prepare one to experience the process of disintegration with a calm and collected mind, rather than fear, attachment, and hysteria, reactions that exacerbate the panic and pain of the experience. The Buddhist understanding of death and rebirth is therefore closely related to Buddhist psychology, with pragmatic methods for easing the pain of transition and loss, as well as to Buddhist theories of ethics.⁵ From a philosophical perspective, however, there are further complications.

The most challenging question is one that has been a topic of debate for centuries: "If there is no unchanging self or soul (*ātman*), what takes rebirth?"⁶ According to all Buddhist schools except the Pudgalavāda, a somewhat obscure school that asserted the existence of a self or soul, all Buddhist schools agree that there is no enduring, substantial, or independently existing entity that continues from life to life. Instead, there is simply an apparent continuity of momentary consciousness from one lifetime to the next that is imbued with the impressions or traces (*samskāra-s*) of the actions one has done in the past. One moment gives rise to the next, in a continuity of causally connected conscious events, but nothing solid or substantial continues from one existence to the next.

The next question that arises is whether rebirth, or re-existence, occurs immediately or whether there is some interval between one lifetime and the next. The answer to this question is complex, because of the diversity of views among the various Buddhist schools. Properly speaking, the question should concern re-conception rather than rebirth, since it is a commonly accepted fact that many sentient beings spend days,

months, or years in the egg or in the mother's womb. Theravādin scholars, such as Buddhaghosa, state that re-conception occurs immediately after death, that is, the continuity of consciousness enters a new state of existence without any interval in-between. Mahāyāna scholars, by contrast, mention the existence of an intermediate type of being, the *antarābhava*, as discussed by Vasubhandu in the *Abhidharmakośa* and its autocommentary.⁷ Later Tibetan scholars concur, describing an intermediate state (Tibetan: *bardo*) between death and re-conception that can last up to 49 days.⁸

Generally speaking, all Buddhists agree that re-conception may occur without any time lapse, as in the case of a sudden accident. All Buddhists also agree that a being's state of mind at the final moment of life is crucially important, since it serves as the proximate cause of the next moment, which serves as the proximate cause of whatever occurs after that. Therefore, it becomes extremely important not to disturb the body or mind of a dying person, but to allow the person to prepare to negotiate the stages of the dying process in the most skillful and advantageous way possible. Displays of grief may cause attachment to arise in the dying person and disputes about the estate may cause anger and disappointment, so all these types of disturbances are considered unfortunate and should be avoided. If the dying person is disturbed and reacts with anger, this may lead to rebirth in a hellish rebirth. If the person generates strong desire, this may lead to a state of intense craving and rebirth as a hungry ghost. If the dying person loses awareness and swoons, the consciousness continues in a form consistent with the person's *karma* and delusions, for better or for worse. On the contrary, if a person has engaged in intensive practices of mental cultivation and has prepared in advance for the process

of dying, it is possible to engender a positive state of mind in the last moment and thereby achieve a fortunate rebirth or even liberation from *samsāra*.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which has strongly influenced the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the consciousness of a person who has died a natural death continues into an intermediate state (*bardo*) and searches for an appropriate rebirth. At each stage, the *bardo* being assumes the identity of its next rebirth. If an appropriate rebirth is not found within seven days, the conscious enters another intermediate state, in a series of up to seven *bardo* existences, each lasting up to seven days in length. At the end of each interval, the *bardo* being experiences a “small death” and begins another intermediate (*bardo*) existence, up to a maximum of 49 days. Influenced by desire, especially sexual desire, the mental consciousness of an ordinary being eventually becomes attracted to a couple in coitus, enters the womb, and takes conception.⁹

Buddhist cultures have developed a variety of practices for dying well and facilitating a better state in the afterlife.¹⁰ To live a kind and ethical life and to meditate on death and impermanence prepare one to die calmly and mindfully. At the time of death, Buddhists chant *sūtras* and dedicate the merit in hopes of ensuring a fortunate rebirth for the deceased. In Chinese cultures, Buddhists also chant sacred sounds (*mantras*) and recite the names of Buddhas (e.g., *Omitofo*) and *bodhisattvas* (e.g., *Namo guan su yin bōsel*). In addition to prayers for a fortunate rebirth, these practices help calm the mind of both the dying and the bereaved. In Tibetan cultures, practitioners meditate on the stages of the dying process and a person may read the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹¹ These practices help the dying person remain calm and unafraid

in the face of death, and also help the practiced practitioner successfully navigate the dissolution of the physical and mental aggregates. Some train in the uniquely Tibetan practice of *phowa* meditation, learning to control the 72,000 winds of the body and consciously direct them through the psychic channels, so that at the time of death, they can consciously transfer their consciousness to a Pure Land, such as the Sukkhavati Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.

The most definitive criterion of death, and signal that the consciousness has left the body, is that the body begins to smell. Until that point, it is best to leave the body resting in peace. Once the consciousness has left the body, since the physical remains are no longer of any use, the body may be disposed of in whatever way is culturally appropriate. Probably influenced by Indian culture, where the body is burned as a symbol of ritual purity and for practical reasons of hygiene, cremation is common practice in most Buddhist societies. In Chinese society and societies influenced by Chinese culture, however, Buddhists may be influenced by Confucian ideas and customs. The body is viewed as a gift from the ancestors, to be respected and not damaged, which leads to a preference for burial. In Tibetan cultures, there is the practice of “sky burial.” After the dying person’s consciousness has left the body, the limbs and other parts of the body are chopped and pounded with roasted barley flour and offered to the birds and wild animals as a last act of generosity.

The different cultural practices related to the disposal of the dead raise questions about organ transplantation and other end-of-life issues. Although it is not possible to go into these questions in detail here, suffice it to say that the overarching principle in Buddhist reflections on these issues is to avoid

taking life. Human life is regarded as extremely precious, so both suicide and assisted suicide are to be avoided. When the time of death comes, it is not regarded as a failure on the part of the dying person, but as a natural consequence of taking birth. Terminally ill and dying patients are treated with loving kindness and compassion, and palliative care is provided, but there is no indication in the texts that life needs to be prolonged artificially. The ethical dilemmas surrounding the terminating of life support arise only once artificial life support has begun. This raises the question of whether family members have a moral obligation to apply artificial life support in the first place. These questions are not addressed in the Buddhist texts, simply because the technology was not available. Buddhist theorists and practitioners are left to ponder these issues on their own, based on the ethical principles the Buddha taught. As bioethical issues take stage center in the coming decades, Buddhists have much to contribute to the conversation. At the same time, these issues raise new questions and pose new challenges to received wisdom, forcing Buddhists to extrapolate beyond the texts to consider critical new social realities.

Endnotes

¹ The ideas presented here are based on Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Into the Jaws of Yama: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

² Examples of this genre include Pabongka, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand: A Concise Discourse on the Path to Enlightenment* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997); Geshe Lhundub Sopa, *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo, The Foundational Practices*, Vol. 1–2 (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2004); and

Tsong-Kha-Pa (ed. Joshua Cutler), *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path of Enlightenment*, Vol. 1–3 (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2001–2004).

³ Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa (trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli), *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, (Colombo: A. Semage, 1964), pp. 633–34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

⁵ The psychological issues raised by Buddhist views are considered in Margaret Coberly, *Sacred Passage: How to Provide Fearless, Compassionate Care for the Dying* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003). The ethical issues are treated in Carl Becker, “Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia,” *Philosophy East and West* 40:4 (1990) 543–54; Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Abortion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998); and Damien Keown, *Buddhism and Bioethics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁶ This question is considered at length in Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness, and Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhism* (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 1995).

⁷ Vasubandhu (trans. Louis de La Vallée Poussin and Leo M. Pruden), *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (4 Vols.) (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988).

⁸ For a detailed explanation of the Tibetan perspective on death and the afterlife, see Lati Rinpochoy and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism* (London: Rider and Company, 1979). Other useful references on the topic include Glenn H. Mullin, trans. and ed., *Living in the Face of Death: The Tibetan Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1998); Giacomella Orofino, *Sacred Tibetan*

Teachings on Death and Liberation: Texts from the Most Ancient Traditions of Tibet (Dorset, England: Prism Press, 1990); Padmasambhava (trans. B. Alan Wallace), *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998); Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); and Francisco J. Varela, *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama*. Boston (Wisdom Publications, 1997).

⁹ Birth from a womb is regarded as just one possible mode of birth. The others are birth from an egg, birth from warmth and moisture (for example, certain insects), and birth by miracle.

¹⁰ See Carl Becker, *Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

¹¹ There are several English translations of this work, including Graham Coleman and Thupten Jinpa, eds., Gyurme Dorje, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: First Complete Translation* (New York: Viking, 2006); Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987); and Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994). These translations supercede W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Or, The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

CHAPTER 3

Dying and Death: Jaina Dharma Traditions

Christopher Key Chapple
Loyola Marymount University

Introduction

This paper is a study of voluntary death through fasting. This practice is followed in the Jaina tradition when death is imminent due to disease or when one is unable to function self-sufficiently. In the case of Jaina monks, the fast might commence when one is no longer able to abide by monastic rules governing nonviolent behavior due to the debility of old age or infirmity. The fast unto death generally takes place at the close of a normal lifespan. It would be unacceptable for a young, healthy person to enter the final fast. No political statement is necessarily being made by the fast and the violence required for this death is minimal. No one has forced the individuals into this choice, although social and religious expectations set the stage for the fast unto death as a possibility within the Jaina tradition.

In his classic book *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep identifies three subcategories of ritual: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation (van Gennep, p. 11). Drawing upon the image of the threshold or limen, he describes these three as preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal (incorporation). Fasting to death constitutes the final and in some ways most important ritual of observant Jainas. Because of its seeming finality, it